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Speaking in Tongues is more than just a coincidence

Two men and two women are in a hotel room, with adulterous intent. For a moment we may think that they're there for a foursome, but it soon becomes clear that we are watching two distinct encounters played simultaneously. The fun is in hearing how exactly the words and reactions of the two couples duplicate one another. It is, if we are to believe them, the first infidelity for everyone concerned. At the end of the scene, though, the ways part. One pair decides to go through with it, the other walks away.

That's the beginning of *Speaking in Tongues*, by the Australian dramatist Andrew Bovell whose *When the Rain Stops Falling* (at the Shaw Festival) was the most haunting and exciting new work seen in these parts last year. *Speaking in Tongues*, produced by Company Theatre under the auspices of CanadianStage, may well carry off the same palm for the current season though, written some 10 years earlier, it's more abrupt, less polished, in its use of fragmented structure and multiple points of view. It's interesting that those same techniques also figure, though in a more conventional format, in the only other Australian play to reach us recently, *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead*. Maybe that's a coincidence, but it's a fitting one, since coincidence is what drives all of these plays.

It especially drives *Speaking in Tongues*, so nakedly and eventually so powerfully that it ceases to be a mere device and becomes a metaphor for what the Greeks would have called fate and we might prefer to think of as the baleful interconnectedness of people and things. It reinforces the old truth that tragedy is the dark reflection of farce. It turns out that the two couples of the first scene were unknowingly engaged in husband-and-wife-swapping, the man in each duo married to the woman in the other. So we get another contrapuntal scene, with the partners who have only committed adultery in their hearts casting out those who have gone the whole hog.

Symmetry proliferates as the two husbands accidentally cross paths in a way that's more funny than painful, the two women in a way that's more painful than funny. Eventually both errant spouses return to ask pardon of their mates, each with a story to tell concerning someone they've met or heard about, a story that throws their own problems into sharp relief. One involves a man who has spent years pining for a woman who left him and who has now reappeared without acknowledging him; the other is of a man who is suspected of murder, on strong circumstantial evidence, but whose wife unquestioningly believes in him. It's the strongest expression of trust that we're to hear, or hear about, all evening.

It's no surprise that in Act Two we meet some of these people and others connected with them, nor that they're

played by the same four actors we've already seen. The pattern is creatively varied by having one, though only one, of the first-act characters reappear in the second, though in a professional rather than a personal capacity. Once again we crosscut between different viewpoints, this time relayed through letters, phone calls, police statements, therapy sessions as well as plain old conversation. We learn more about the reported death, and how it might have been averted if somebody had picked up a phone.

This may sound like the cruellest, and dramatically crudest, of accidents, but it turns out to be the most crushing, and also the most inevitable, of all the coincidences. Although there's another one still to come. Everything connects in a play that is, ironically, about missed connections. Nearly everybody in it wants to connect; nearly everybody, to some degree, fails.

The play lost me just once: in a second-act sequence where all present recount their unpersuasively identical dreams. Philip Riccio's production is wittily precise and fleet-voiced in the early scenes and gets steadily deeper and darker as it goes on. The actors cohere as a team and shine as individuals.

Yanna McIntosh's double performance exemplifies the evening's progression; elegant and controlled before the intermission, even when in pain, she's frighteningly frightened after it, spending most of her time, and all of her change, calling for help from a deserted pay phone. This must be the most vulnerable performance she's ever given.

Jonathan Goad, initially your bluff average guy, transforms into a puzzled man, not so much protesting his innocence as explaining it. (Conceivably he's lying, but the play is undercutting itself if it wants us to think so. And come to think of it, though we're constantly shown people deceiving themselves or one another, there are very few outright lies.)

Helene Joy passes from puzzled near-innocence, disappointed in itself, to a glittering, rather scary account of the one character who survives by disdaining any kind of emotional commitment.

Finest of all may be Richard Clarkin, who alone in the cast gets to play three roles; in the last he seems to gain age and weight simply by turning toward us and revealing that he wears glasses. He's the most pitiable character and also, if guilt has to be apportioned, the guiltiest. It's largely through him that the play ends up cutting harrowingly deep. And Company Theatre's virtually unblemished record remains so.

